Influences of Facebook on English-Spanish Bilinguals’ Writing

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Abstract
This study examined the ways in which four Hispanic bilingual students used informal English and Spanish to communicate through status updates on Facebook. Analysis of these individuals’ online writing and survey responses indicated that they used a distinct style of English and Spanish to communicate with other Facebook users. Their nontraditional written correspondence included non-standard capitalization, unconventional punctuation and invented spelling, as well as the addition of symbols and non-words. Furthermore, the findings suggest that these women were motivated to intentionally manipulate standard language not only by a desire to type faster, but also by the way in which they wished to portray themselves and their perception that their online friends did not care about their online writing style. Finally, implications for general, English as a second language and bilingual educators are discussed.

Introduction
Today, more than ever before, teenagers and young adults are using the internet to communicate with others. Prensky (2004) describes “digital natives” as those who grew up learning how to use technology unlike older generations of “digital immigrants” who learned these skills. Digital natives live in a world filled with, among other things, instant messages, emails and chat-rooms. Rather than using traditional print mediums of communication, students are now engaging in ever-changing technological advances (Carrington, 2005; Prensky, 2004). Facebook, a social networking site, is just one way digital natives choose to correspond with one another. Its more than 500 million users are able to keep in touch with people all around the world (Facebook, 2010).

Internet sites like Facebook allow individuals to engage in a distinct way of writing which is sometimes referred to as “netspeak” (Crystal, 2004). “Netlish” or “weblish” are also sometimes used to describe this unique style of online language (Crystal, 2004, p. 78). Previous studies (Baron, 2008; Crystal, 2004; Ling & Baron, 2010; Merchant, 2001) have investigated how English users engage in netspeak. These authors have noted how internet users do not closely adhere to rules of standard punctuation, capitalization and spelling. However, netspeak is not limited to English, but rather can apply to different written languages commonly found on the internet (Crystal, 2004). For instance, Spanish speakers were found to use nonstandard text while using technological mediums of communication in a manner similar to their English counterparts (Carroll, 2008; Crystal, 2008).

Although other researchers have looked at English netspeak, little empirical evidence exists which show how English-Spanish bilinguals living in Texas use nonstandard language to communicate online and no studies have analyzed netspeak found on Facebook. The most comparable study was that of Carroll (2008) who examined how the two languages were used on MySpace profiles; however, his research focused on Americans living in Puerto Rico rather than
Texas. Also, Carroll looked at the text without having the profiles’ authors explain their reasons for their language use. His results showed that English-Spanish bilinguals used a mixture of the two languages to communicate on the site.

This paper discusses data from a small-scale study conducted in 2010. The research investigates bilingual participants’ incorporation of informal language to communicate with one another through status updates on Facebook. Therefore, the principal topic of inquiry addresses not only journal readers, but also educators and more specifically teachers of dual language and ESL (English as a second language) students interested in better understanding the ways in which the current generation of bilingual Hispanic students interacts with language and their motivations for manipulating conventional writing. Thus, the following questions will guide the study: a) How do English-Spanish bilinguals use nonstandard writing to communicate using Facebook?, and b) What are the reasons participants give for using nonstandard language on Facebook?

Clearly, the answers to these questions will draw attention, evoke curiosity, and provide insight to influence educators in their approach to meeting the academic and social needs of today’s students. To help the reader more clearly understand the structure of this article, first, I will include some literature related to the topic of investigation. Next, I will provide the study’s methodology, findings, conclusions and educational implications, bearing in mind that the terms online/internet informal, nonstandard, unconventional and nontraditional language will be used interchangeably to refer to the use of nonstandard spelling, capitalization and punctuation, as well as the addition of abbreviations, acronyms and symbols.

**Online Language Use**

The text students use to communicate online is different from standard English (Barron, 2008; Carroll, 2008; Crystal, 2004; Knobel & Lanskear, 2006; Ling & Baron, 2010; Merchant, 2001; Witte, 2007). The beginning of the 21st century brought an increasing volume of research which focused on how students’ internet chat differs from formal language. For instance, Merchant (2001)’s study drew on AIM (AOL instant messenger) conversations and in-depth interviews of six teenage girls (ages 14-16). The girls shared their experiences and opinions of interactive communication on the web, chatrooms, e-mails and bulletin boards (p. 296). Merchant noted that virtual interactions allowed individuals to “talk” more freely than ever before (p. 294). However, this type of talk took the form of online writing. Merchant suggested that:

> teenagers and young people are in the vanguard of these processes of change as they fluently exploit the possibilities of digital technology, radically changing the face of literacy in a variety of media through their uses of mobile phone text messages, e-mails, web-pages and online chatrooms (p. 294).

Merchant (2001) further noted that most of the teenagers learned the distinctive features of internet communication through first hand experiences. For instance, in the course of online conversation, participants would ask the person with whom they were speaking to clarify any unfamiliar terms (p. 302).

In a later study, Baron (2008) also examined online language through a pilot study in which American University undergraduates and very recent graduate students’ instant message conversations were analyzed (p. 57). She concluded that internet abbreviations were infrequently used. Although previous studies have looked at online writing, far less information exists on how English-Spanish bilinguals use nonstandard language online. Notably, one author that focused on this topic
was Carroll (2008) who investigated bilinguals’ netspeak. Carroll closely analyzed the MySpace profiles of three individuals between the ages of 18 and 22. He found that his subjects engaged in English-Spanish netspeak in a similar manner to their monolingual English counterparts. For instance, s12 represented saludos since the letters s and l combined with the number 2 to represent dos sounds similar to saludos (Crystal, 2008, p. 133). Just as English acronyms use letters to represent words, Spanish acronyms are used in a similar manner. For instance, tq represents te quiero (Crystal, 2008, 141).

Recently, Ling and Baron (2010) suggested similarities may exist between instant messages and text messages’ symbols, lexical shortening, acronyms and sentence punctuation. Although little has been published on text messaging in Spanish, Crystal (2008) did note similar patterns. He found that Spanish texters abbreviated endings with the word’s final letter. When the word ended in a consonant, it was shortened by ending the word in the final consonant (e.g., dcr to mean decir). When the word ended in a vowel, the word’s abbreviation also ended in a vowel (e.g., nka to mean nunca) unless the word ended in -ante or -ente (e.g., gnt to mean gente). Finally, Crystal noted that Spanish texters used double letters to represent the plural form of a word (e.g., mm to represent meses) (pp.144-145).

The Facebook Phenomenon

Since the number of individuals with Facebook accounts changes from day to day, it was not possible to obtain the exact number of users. Yet, by looking at the rapid growth of this social network, one can see the ever increasing role of Facebook in today’s world. In August 2008, Facebook had reached over 100 million active users (those who have logged onto the site within the last 30 days). Just 13 months later, in September 2009, this number grew to over 300 million active users (Facebook, 2010).

The most recent statistics (viewed December 30, 2010) showed that Facebook has more than 500 million active users and of these individuals, 50% have logged on to the site at least once a day (Facebook, 2010). Simply stated, this web site has a large role in the communication and social networking of individuals in their daily lives (Selwyn, 2009). Keats’ (2007) Control + Alt + Delete: A Dictionary of Cyberslang explains the term “social network” as, “connecting people online based on mutual acquaintances, social networking websites offer a virtual alternative to communities formed around work or school” (p. 215).

In fact, Facebook’s impact is not limited to the United States, but instead spans countries and exists in many languages. About 70% of users are outside of the United States (Facebook, 2010). The website states the following purpose:

Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people’s real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment (Facebook, 2010).

One important feature of this social network is that it allows its users to display status updates (SUs), also called newsfeeds or posts, which appear on a user’s Facebook page to tell online friends anything the user would like to say. In the past, individuals’ newsfeeds would automatically be preceded by their name and the word is. Abraham and Pearlman (2008) explain, “Sometimes people use their status to help connect…Sometimes they use it to keep people informed of things they need to know…And sometimes, people ignore the motivation for the suggested is structure...
entirely and write whatever they want” (p. 167). More recently, a box at the top of the screen asks, “What’s on your mind?” which prompts users to fill in the box with their thoughts. This text then appears on their profile pages as well as the home pages of their online friends.

Do New Literacies Hurt or Help Students as Writers?

With more and more young people using sites like Facebook, instant messages, email, and chatrooms, one may wonder how online language has impacted academic writing. Although the answer remains unclear, what may be apparent is that in order to help digital natives succeed, educators must be careful not to dismiss evolving internet language as a fad or devalue it. Merchant (2001) states, “So long as different kinds of electronic communication are restricted to a relatively narrow field, describing them as ‘popular’ or ‘frivolous’ can be a way of ignoring or denigrating them” (p. 296). While some scholars suggest online writing has a negative effect on standard writing, other researchers claim the internet is beneficial to writers because it provides them with opportunities to produce their own text (Cunningam & Allington, 2008; Hedberg & Brudvik, 2008). However, online authorship will not necessarily help improve writing skills, because many online mediums generally do not require students to use correct grammar (Knobel & Lanskear, 2006, p. 88).

Given the aforementioned similarities between instant messages and text messages, it may be helpful to look to findings from Plester, Wood and Bell (2008)'s study which examined the relationship between text messaging and school literacy. In one part, they asked 11 and 12 year old children to translate texting abbreviations (“textisms) into standard English and vice versa. The researchers found a positive correlation between students’ ability to translate conventional writing into language used in text messages and higher verbal reasoning scores. These findings may suggest that students benefit from using such textisms, which are often also found in online dialogue. Surprisingly, of the many acronyms available, few have remained in use for a long period of time (Baron, 2008). Therefore, one may infer that the impact internet language has on individuals is short lived. Ultimately, online language use is still relatively new and additional research may be needed to determine how this type of language affects standard writing.

Method

This study is grounded in two sequentially conducted portions: the initial Perceptions of Facebook Language Use Survey (PFLUS) and the subsequent observation of the participants’ status updates (SUs) in an attempt to answer the following questions: 1) How do English-Spanish bilinguals use nonstandard writing to communicate using Facebook? and 2) What are the reasons participants give for using nonstandard language on Facebook?

Participants

The study was conducted at a south Texas University. In order to obtain suitable subjects, I visited a total of seven classes in three different disciplines (education, business and reading). The sampling criteria for participant selection included females between the ages of 18 and 55, that frequently displayed English and Spanish Facebook status updates to communicate with their online friends. Surveys were distributed in students’ classrooms and required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Using the names and emails provided by the women, I did a search on Facebook to find them online. The women were then asked to become my Facebook friends, which allowed me to view their SUs as well as anything else displayed on their profile. In cases where
searches did not find the individuals, I sent an email requesting to be added as a friend. A total of seventeen women (three graduate and 14 undergraduate) met the criteria, and filled out the survey and consent forms.

As a result, ten of the seventeen students who had filled out surveys added me to their list of friends. Of these ten women, all claimed to regularly use English and Spanish on Facebook. However, upon reviewing their profiles, it was found that five individuals had SUs that did not regularly include both languages. The five remaining users (one graduate and four undergraduates) were considered to be “intensive bilingual Facebook users.” To be classified as such, they needed to display status updates written in one language (either English or Spanish) less than 85% of the time, and written in the other language/or a combination of the languages more than 15% of the time.

Data collected from the four undergraduates was used in this paper. For the sake of confidentiality the women, who were all of Mexican descent, were given the pseudonyms Daniela, Linda, Sofia and Ema. Survey responses indicated that all believed themselves to be equally dominant in English and in Spanish, with the exception of Sofia who selected Spanish as her dominant language. Additionally, Sofia, Daniela and Linda received most of their education in both English and Spanish, while Ema received her education predominantly in Spanish. Furthermore, the four subjects were majoring in education or bilingual education. Three of the four subjects were 18 years old, while the remaining student was 23 years old.

Procedures

The goal of the Perceptions of Facebook Language Use Survey (PFLUS) was to understand why students believed they used various forms of netspeak and whether or not they felt that the way they wrote on Facebook had affected the way they wrote on academic papers. On the survey, participants were asked to indicate whether or not they used each of the six forms of unconventional language often associated with netspeak. Then, they were given the option of selecting one or more reasons as to why they wrote in this manner. If their reason for doing so was not provided, they could choose “other” and offer a reason not mentioned on the list. The last part of the survey required participants to state whether or not they believed the way they wrote online had affected their school work and to provide an explanation.

The purpose of examining the status updates (SUs) was to see if and how students engaged in netspeak. Rather than looking at all aspects of the participants’ profiles, I focused on the language used in SUs. Although the women responded to messages left by others, I looked only at the original SUs posted by the participants. The reason for this was that the language the four participants used to respond may have been influenced by the person with whom they were communicating. In contrast, SUs were intended for all Facebook friends.

I was able to view all the SUs ever posted by subjects, provided that they did not delete any of them. The 100 most recent SUs were selected from three of the subjects, while 76 SUs were selected from one of the participants; the reason for this was that she did not have any additional SUs. If the text only contained symbols or words (e.g., :), ahhh and ooo) that could not be classified as English, Spanish or a combination of both, a different SU was used in its place.
Data Analysis

For the Perceptions of Facebook Language Use Survey (PFLUS), I tallied the frequencies and observed general patterns in which the women selected each of the reasons for using netspeak in the following categories: symbols, acronyms, invented spelling/shortened words, nonstandard capitalization, nontraditional punctuation and non-words. Similarly, students’ written explanations of whether or not their online language habits affected their academic work were examined for commonalities.

Next, status updates were inspected and coded for informal language use, including the categories mentioned on the PFLUS. In some cases, participants’ netspeak did not fit into just one group, but rather, was classified into more than one section. I then examined each of the categories for patterns, which caused subcategories to emerge. After being classified, frequencies for each subject’s netspeak were counted, graphed using Excel software, and compared to the frequencies of the other participants. Generally, if three or more of the women wrote text that fell into a given subgroup, it was considered to be a commonality.

The next step in analyzing the data was comparing SUs and PFLUS to better understand not only if students’ accurately stated the ways in which they wrote on Facebook, but also their perceptions of their online language. I used constant triangulation analysis to ensure the accuracy of the results. Finally, the findings were interpreted to reflect patterns found in previous studies.

Findings

This section provides a description of how participants used nonstandard writing in their status updates. It also discusses the survey results, which show the reasons participants gave for their online language use.

Summary of Status Updates (SUs) Results

The first research question was: 1) How do English-Spanish bilinguals use nonstandard writing to communicate using Facebook? To begin to answer this question, it was necessary to inspect status updates which indicated that each participant used similar informal language regardless of the language in which they chose to express themselves. No participant wrote equally in English and Spanish. Ema (figure 1), whose Facebook posts were most evenly divided between the languages wrote in English 50% of the time, Spanish 45% of the time and both 5% of the time. Daniela (figure 2) and Linda (figure 3) wrote more frequently in Spanish; in contrast, Sofia (figure 4) wrote more frequently in English. Moreover, SUs written in both English and Spanish included the greatest number of words, with a mean of 19.53 and median of 19 words per post; while SUs which contained only Spanish contained slightly fewer words with a mean and median of 16.83 and 14 words each respectively. Lastly, SUs that included only English had a mean of 14.25 and median of 11 words each.

Regardless of the language of the Facebook SUs, several patterns regarding students’ use of netspeak emerged. First, most of the symbols included in SUs were emoticons, defined in part as:

a sequential combination of keyboard characters designed to convey the emotion associated with a particular facial expression. The simplest forms represent attitudes- positive, in the case of ‘:)' and negative in the case of ‘:('. Another way in which online users’ language differs from standard language use, is through internet users’ addition of emoticons (Crystal, 2004).
Certain emoticons were used by all four participants (i.e., :) : ( and :D). There were also two symbols that were used by three of the four participants: <3 and :$. Most of the time, symbols were placed at the end of a sentence or within a pause break. The symbols an individual used in one language were generally relatively similar to the symbols used in the other language or a combination of the two.

Another commonality between the women’s writing was the relatively infrequent addition of acronyms, which ranged from zero to 13 uses per participant. Of the total five acronyms present, four were in English: ily (I love you), bff (best friend forever), lol (laugh out loud) and jk (just kidding). Only one, tkm (te quiero mucho) was in Spanish. The acronym jk was used the most by the writers (three of the four). Regardless of the language, acronyms were generally written in lowercase letters and accompanied by an emoticon. For instance, a phrase with lol or jk often included the emoticons :) or :D. Similarly, a phrase with ily or tkm commonly preceded a heart symbol. For instance, Ema wrote: I’m a teenager Christmas doesn’t excite me :/ haaha jk im counting the dayys :D (quote from SU on December 2010).

Unlike acronyms, which were rarely included, nontraditional spelling was ubiquitous in the SUs and produced seven significant subcategories. In order to be considered a significant subcategory, all of the students had to display an SU with language that could be categorized under this group. The first group was comprised of letters that had been repeated unnecessarily (e.g., tigresito00 and BooreD). Since letters were repeated so frequently, rather than counting each word that contained repeated letters, the entire SU was counted as one example. The second group consisted of words where a required space between words was omitted. The third contained a k to represent Spanish words that were conventionally spelled with qu (e.g., kiero for quiero). In the fourth, participants had used the names of letters, in their respective language, to phonetically represent words and/or parts of words in both English (e.g., b for be and u for you) and Spanish (e.g., k for que/qué, porK for porque/porqué and bb for bebe). In the Fifth, letters were left out to make words shorter (e.g., pple for people and bn for bien). In the sixth group, part of the word was used (e.g., cuz for because). Finally, the seventh group contained basic words that were written as they sounded in English (e.g., luv for love and nuthing for nothing) and Spanish (e.g., stas for estás).

Just as all users frequently spelled words unconventionally, all also repeatedly included non-words. Haha and/or jaja was used by the four students to indicate laughter. Variations of aw and woo were also used by most participants. At some point, all of the women included repeated letters or syllables in their non-words (e.g., Hahahahaha and aawww). It is worth mentioning that some non-words were specific to certain individuals (e.g., Ema repeatedly used yay and Sofia constantly wrote ugh). Also included in this category were slang and invented words. For instance gonna was written in place of going to. Surprisingly, slang was only present in SUs which contained English and was absent from Spanish posts. Finally, all users created their own words (e.g., best-est).

In contrast to non-words which were easily quantifiable, it was not possible for me to count all the instances in which punctuation and capitalization were incorrectly written. This was due to the fact that many phrases and sentences could be punctuated in different ways, which in many cases would result in the capitalization of the first letter of the following word. For instance, all of the users had run-on sentences which lacked punctuation or included incorrect punctuation such as commas or ellipses. Hence, the number of sentences that could be created from a longer sentence depended on the person editing the text.
In other cases, sentence fragments generally did not include any punctuation or capitalization of the first letter. In addition, some of the women chose to include lyrics and poems in which authors generally have greater flexibility in their use of punctuation and capitalization. Overall, the Facebook users chose to frequently not capitalize the first letter of their sentences. Similarly, most of the participants, at times, also wrote the first letter of the names of friends and places in lowercase. In contrast, words which were conventionally written in lowercase letters were capitalized for emphasis. Daniela exemplifies this: *soo my weekend starts NOW :D woooo* (Quote from SU on October 29, 2010).

Although some sentences included end punctuation, at times, they did not follow the rules of traditional writing. Notably, exclamations were frequently repeated in both languages. Also, question marks and exclamations at the beginning of Spanish sentences were omitted. Finally in English, apostrophes were often absent; while in Spanish, accents were missing.

Clearly, the data suggests that the bilingual women in this study employed comparable informal writing in both English and Spanish. In the following SU, Sofia illustrates this point through her use of unconventional capitalization, nonstandard punctuation and repeated letters in each language: *oh my goD!! IOOs videos K me dijite k viiera Estan SupeR chitoSoos jajajaja....i wasS alsSo cracking up feOO.....* (Quote from SU on November 9, 2010). Likewise, while writing in both English and Spanish, Linda uses non-words (*aish, pfft and blah blah*) in a comparable manner. Moreover, she also fails to apply the rules of standard capitalization and punctuation: *back to school aish..ya me duele la espalda y luego…pff…y luego sin compu..y luego sin…..blah blah* (Quote from SU on August 26, 2010).

**Summary of Perceptions of Facebook Language Use Survey (PFLUS) Results**

The second question was: What are the reasons participants give for using nonstandard language on Facebook? On the PFLUS, all the women expressed that they did use each of the six categories of informal language. Overall, they indicated that they selected the following four phrases to explain why they used netspeak: 1) To communicate thoughts and/or emotions better; 2) Those reading what I have written do not care if it is written using standard language; 3) It is a faster way to type, and 4) It is a reflection of my personality. However, no one claimed that they wrote using nontraditional language because they did not know how to use standard English or Spanish. Each of these reasons are further examined.

**#1 To communicate my thoughts and/or emotions better**

The addition of emoticons seemed to express participants’ ideas and feelings in a way words could not. Similarly, non-words also gave online readers a unique perspective of how users thought and felt, regardless of whether or not they were explicitly stated. For example, Ema wrote: *hahahaha emm noo see.. tantas cosas haha :P* (Quote from SU on December 4th, 2010). This post shows that Ema finds her post to be funny without directly declaring her thoughts. Ema’s quote also allows the reader to “hear” the author. By this I mean the utterance *emm* seems to show Sofia’s brief contemplation, while the addition of an extra *e* on the word *se* drags out the final sound of the word, which appears to emphasize her uncertainty.

In the following example, Linda’s use of repeated punctuation further emphasizes her stated feelings of excitement and anxiousness: *se llego la hora! Ya va a nacer mi sobrinita! Yayy… andamos super emocionados y ansiosos…!!!!* (Quote from SU on May 16, 2010).
#2 Those reading what I have written do no care if it is written using standard language

The four bilingual women’s Facebook profiles contained their online friends’ responses to SUs. These friends often wrote in a similar manner to the participants, which may suggest that since those in the users’ social network do not employ traditional written language, they will not judge others for deviating from standard English and Spanish. Furthermore, at no point does anyone point out any type of error with SUs.

#3 It is a faster way to type

In many cases, the writer needed to type fewer keys to write informally than to produce formal text. Clearly, it is generally quicker to not capitalize letters, omit punctuation/accents, abbreviate words and use acronyms. Similarly, the use of emoticons, non-words and repeated punctuation allowed individuals to share their feelings without taking the time to directly state them.

#4 It is a reflection of my personality

Although there were similarities in the way users wrote, each participant had a distinct way of using nonstandard English and Spanish. For instance, in nearly every post, Sofia used repeated letters in several words. Daniela also had her own unique way of writing; she would sometimes use repeated periods to transition from one thought to the next. Moreover, the various aspects of netspeak add life and character to the SUs. When readers are able to “hear” the writer behind the words, they are likely to have a better idea of his or her personality.

Facebook and Academic Writing

When asked if their online writing influenced the way they wrote on school assignments, Daniela, Ema and Linda stated it did not because they understood when each writing style was appropriate. Ema illustrates this point: I think it hasn’t affected the way I write for school because I know the importance of using standard grammar rules for school. Therefore I believe that it has had no impact on my studies…I’m still able to distinguish and have a mindset of the difference between schoolwork and Facebook (Quote from PFLUS).

Sofia was the only one that felt that it had both a positive and negative impact on the way she wrote academic papers: I believe that the way I write on facebook has affected the way I write school assignments negatively and positively. It has affected me because I get used to doing all this shortcuts, and now I want to do them in school assignments too. I always try to proofread my assignments so that I get rid of this, but it gets tiring to be proofreading everything (Quote from PFLUS).

Discussion and Conclusions

Although researchers have studied online language use in English, only one previous study (Carroll, 2008) has focused on how bilinguals do so. Furthermore, many studies have limited their scope to aspects of online language without providing a holistic, comprehensive picture of how Hispanic bilinguals’ internet writing deviates from standard English and Spanish. Finally, it has often been up to the researcher to guess why users employ their unique writing techniques rather than asking the individuals themselves to explain their reasons for manipulating standard languages. This study analyzed the ways in which bilingual women used language on Facebook status updates and the reasons they provided for doing so. The data suggests some general postulates regarding the participants’ application of nontraditional language.
Undoubtedly, unconventional online writing plays an integral role in the ways in which the four women in this study communicated on Facebook. Notably, these users, in many ways, demonstrated how they may purposefully choose to incorporate a distinct style of online language. Rather than finding many errors that indicated that these women did not know how to write correctly (e.g., incorrect use of homophones or diction) the frequency of symbols, invented spelling, and non-words, as well as the presence of unconventional punctuation and capitalization appears to be intentional. This is supported by the fact that none of the students claimed that they used netspeak because they did not know how to write correctly.

However, when it comes to some aspects of punctuation and capitalization it remains unclear as to whether or not students accurately perceived their writing abilities. By this I mean, when students did not indicate on the PPLUS that they deviated from traditional language because they did not know how to correctly write in each language, they may have overestimated their writing abilities. Therefore, it is difficult to see if these women do in fact know where to put appropriate punctuation such as commas and Spanish accents.

One way in which subjects seemed to intentionally deviate from conventional writing was by regularly including symbols to represent smiling faces, frowning faces and hearts. Contrary to recent studies (Baron, 2008; Baron and Ling, 2010) who noted the infrequency of emoticons in instant massages, I found that participants’ SUs regularly included symbols to show how they were feeling. Conversely, the SUs did support Provine, Spencer and Mandell (2010)’s conclusions that emoticons were often placed at the end of a sentence and/or within phrase breaks.

Also, similar to previous findings (Baron, 2008; Merchant, 2001), I discovered that invented or non-traditional spelling played a significant part in users’ writing. Interestingly, these deviations generally did not appear to be accidental, but rather words that were intentionally misspelled by the user. In both languages, the participants repeated letters, omitted spaces, used the phonetic sounds of letters to represent words, left out letters, used parts of words and wrote basic words incorrectly (e.g. gud for good and iz for is). Clearly, college students majoring in education would be well aware of the spellings of such words.

Additionally, in Spanish, k was used to represent qu. Furthermore, the data did support Merchant (2001)’s finding that creative spelling can be read more like speech (e.g., what for wot). So too, like the teenagers in Merchant’s study (2001), the PPLUS indicated that this type of spelling allowed users to type faster. Although creative spellings of English words were found to agree with previous data, many of the Spanish abbreviations and alternate spelling were found to be different than those provided by Carroll (2008). This may suggest that just as individuals from Mexico have a different dialect of Spanish than those from Puerto Rico, they also employ unique forms of informal internet writing.

Another important finding, was that the data did support Baron (2008) and Ling and Baron (2010)’s conclusion that acronyms were rarely present. However, when they were included, they were limited in scope and were generally in English. Another significant conclusion was that non-words, which included slang and invented words, were used by all subjects; although, only variations of haha, jaja, aw, and woo were present in the majority of participants’ SUs.

Finally, participants often failed to correctly capitalize the first letters of sentences and proper nouns. Similarly, they left out accents in Spanish words and did not include apostrophes in English ones. Also, in both languages, subjects omitted necessary punctuation at the end of sentences in some cases and used repeated or incorrect punctuation in other cases. This lack of punctuation lends evidence to Baron (2008) and Ling and Baron (2010)’s conclusion that online writers often do not include necessary punctuation.
Just as SUs offered important insight into the online writing styles of participants, so too, did the responses regarding Facebook language use. The PFLUS suggested that these bilingual writers consciously selected the type of writing they used to achieve various purposes. The PFLUS responses indicated that these students’ use of online language is motivated not only by a desire to type faster, but also by the way in which they wish to portray themselves, specifically their thoughts, feelings and personality, as well as their perception that their online friends do not care about the correctness of the participants’ writing. Second, when asked by the PFLUS whether or not the individuals’ Facebook writing habits affected academic assignments, most of the women believed it did not. However, given the small sample size it would be advisable that research with a larger population is needed to support or challenge the findings and conclusions offered in this paper. I would suggest that future studies compare students’ academic and online writing to more accurately gauge students’ awareness of which styles are acceptable in different domains.

Furthermore, this was a small-scale study and the findings may not be the same with larger or different populations. For instance, a similar study with students outside of the south Texas region may reach different conclusions. Another limitation is that this study only looks at undergraduate females. Undergraduate males may use language differently on the internet. Finally, one may get different results when using data from bilinguals who communicate in languages other than English and Spanish.

Implications for General and Bilingual (Dual Language) Education

1) When it comes to academic writing, find out what students already know

It is advisable that educators understand that just because students may use non-standard language online, it does not necessarily indicate that they do not know how to write correctly. Conversely, if examination of students’ work suggests that they have overestimated their writing capabilities, it is important that instructors help students to become fully aware of their errors and how to correct them. By understanding what abilities students already possess, teachers may offer praise for what students do well while focusing on weaker areas that need development.

2) Clearly express expectations for writing assignments

One challenge is for teachers to identify commonalities that exist between contemporary and traditional writing (Hadsford & Arlington, 2008). Although most of the women in this study expressed that they understood that school and Facebook require different types of language, I would advise teachers to emphasize what is expected of students’ written work. While it may be clear that smiley faces or lol should be absent from formal essays, the inclusion of other written aspects is likely to depend on the educator. For instance, some instructors allow passive voice, while others advocate the sole use of active voice. Similarly, in some classes, it is suitable to use first persons, while in other classes, the use of third person is encouraged. Furthermore, teachers of creative writing courses may accept non-traditional pieces where language differs from scholarly text. Therefore, teacher guidance and clear rubrics may highlight what is considered acceptable for particular assignments.

3) Give students opportunities to communicate with others online

Given the important role internet communication plays in the lives of many students, it only makes sense for educators to incorporate online technology in the classroom. By capitalizing
on students’ knowledge of instant messaging, emailing, chatting, blogging and social networking, students are likely to feel their skills are valued. Also, this enables internet authors to share their work with a larger audience and, consequently, to hear feedback not only from the teacher, but from people all around the world.

4) Give students opportunities to express themselves

All of the participants in the study stated their desire to express their thoughts, emotions and personality motivated their use of non-standard writing. Yet, in an academic environment, students are generally discouraged from using netspeak as a reflection of themselves. As a result, it is advisable that educators offer many other opportunities for students to convey their ideas, feelings and who they really are.

Final Thought

Ultimately, the data suggests that in most cases bilingual writers consciously select the type of online language they use to achieve various purposes. Therefore, by better understanding how and why students engage in nonstandard writing, educators can begin to devise ways to meet the needs of today’s digital natives.
Figures 1-4: Frequencies of Participants’ Nonstandard Writing on Facebook status updates
References